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ABSTRACT

This paper points out the irrelevance of the sentence-based grammatical explanations found in most grammar reference books and ESL textbooks with regard to answering questions such as: (1) when and why do native speakers of English use the passive rather than the active voice, and (2) when and why does the native speaker of English use the present perfect tense rather than the simple past or the simple present? These questions represent exactly the type of information the ESL teacher must transmit in grammar lessons. A strategy for answering such questions is suggested and demonstrated with examples from relevant studies. The strategy includes researching the literature, analyzing appropriate data, constructing hypotheses and testing them out. Language learners should get grammar and usage rules based on fact and statistical consensus, and not on outdated prescriptions, native speaker intuition or hypothetical analysis. The paper argues the need to get linguistically talented ESL students to carry out ESL-centered investigations of English structure in context and describes some of the recently completed and forthcoming studies undertaken by TESL students at UCLA at the Master's level. (Author/CLK)

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ENGLISH STRUCTURE IN CONTEXT: AN AREA OF RESEARCH FOR ESL SPECIALISTS

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Introduction.

It is generally acknowledged that having a good grasp of the syntactic and semantic structure of English is a prerequisite to being a competent ESL specialist. There is, of course, no inverse relationship implied: if one has the required linguistic background, he or she must still achieve an understanding of ESL methodology, techniques, and materials to be an effective teacher.

What the opening statement does mean, however, is that prospective ESL teachers must not neglect the often difficult and time-consuming process of learning about English structure; this is something they now frequently do on the grounds that they are interested primarily in audio-visual materials, cultural problems, attitude and motivation, testing, etc. It must become clearly and generally understood that meaningful work cannot be carried out in any ESL area--including classroom teaching--without satisfaction of the linguistic prerequisite.

These statements are rather obvious, but what tends to be overlooked is that while the necessary background in the structure of English is very difficult for some prospective ESL teachers to acquire,[1] acquisition comes fairly easily to others who have a natural talent for understanding linguistic descriptions and doing linguistic analysis.

This paper has three purposes: (1) to argue the need to get linguistically talented ESL students to carry out ESL-centered investigations of English structure in context, (2) to describe some of the recently completed and immediately forthcoming studies undertaken by ESL students at UCLA who have been so inclined, and (3) to provide suggestions and guidelines for future research that students might undertake if they happen to be interested in this area of research.

The Need for Context-Centered Studies of English.

The proponents of deductive-cognitive methods of language instruction have now taken momentum away from proponents of inductive-behaviorist ones. This, of course, suggests that ESL teachers following a deductive-cognitive methodology have at their disposal the rules or generalizations necessary for implementing such an approach to language instruction. Unfortunately, in the area of English structure, this is not the case. The two sources of information that ESL teachers have easy access to, i.e. reference grammars and ESL textbooks, usually do not provide information that would help him/her formulate definitively accurate answers to questions such as the following:

1. When and why do native speakers of English use the passive rather than the active voice?

2. In what environments does the native speaker use the quantifiers 'lot of/lots of' rather than the quantifiers 'many/much', and why?

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3. When and why does the native speaker of English use the present perfect tense rather than the simple past or the simple present?

ETC.

A proper answer to such questions presupposes a good knowledge of language in context. Slager (1973) argues that such knowledge is exactly what the ESL teacher must transmit in grammar lessons; however, most ESL texts do not adequately answer questions like the above either because the exercises provided still emphasize the teaching of form as opposed to meaning[2] or because the explanations provided are incomplete and misleading. For example, several ESL texts would answer the question stated in (2) more or less as follows:

4. Many occurs with countable nouns, much with uncountable nouns, and a lot of/lots of with either. Use many and a lot of/lots of in affirmative statements and questions; use many and much or their informal equivalents, a lot of/lots of, in negative statements.

E.G. a. I have many books.
b. I have a lot of books.
c. I have lots of homework.
d. *I have much homework.
e. I don't have much homework.
f. I don't have a lot of homework.

ETC.

While such over-simplified presentations may be satisfactory for use with beginning ESL students, such generalizations obscure many important facts that intermediate and advanced ESL students (and their teachers) should be aware of. In such formulations, many points are completely ignored, for example, the acceptable use of much in affirmative statements (5), differences in distribution between a lot and lots of (6), and possible differences in meaning between many/much versus a lot of/lots of (7):

5. a. They had made much commotion over nothing.
b. There was much information presented in a short time.

6. a. Thanks a lot.
b. *Thanks lots.

7. a. He doesn't have much money.
b. He doesn't have a lot of money.

{For most speakers of English (b) implies a larger amount than (a).[3]

Most deductively inclined ESL teachers cannot find accurate rules in the texts they use. Furthermore, they have not been prepared to give their students proper explanations in such cases. If the ESL teacher turns to reference grammars and linguistic descriptions--his/her other prime sources of information--other problems arise.

Until very recently, little attention has been paid to language in context.[4] Sentences have been studied in isolation, and rules have been written to relate and label as "synonymous" or "equivalent" sentence relationships such as active versus passive (8), symmetric predicates (9), various types of complementation (10), etc.

8. a. The man hit the boy.
   b. The boy was hit by the man. (Chomsky, 1957, and others)

9. a. John is similar to Bill.
   b. Bill is similar to John.
   c. John and Bill are similar. (Lakoff and Peters, 1969)

10. a. It is odd that John left early.
    b. For John to leave early is odd.
    c. John's leaving early is odd. (Rosenbaum, 1967, among others)

Sher (1975), for example, criticizes the Lakoff and Peters analysis of sentences such as those cited in (9) and demonstrates that differences in meaning describable in terms of context are a part of semantic meaning and not simply a matter of 'pragmatics' or 'performance' as some theoretical linguists have suggested. Philosophical issues aside, the ESL teacher must grapple with language in context whether the linguist chooses to do so or not.

I have long felt that the transformational-generative emphasis on synonymy or equivalence in syntactic-semantic matters was of little use to the ESL teacher (see Celce, (1970)). Descriptions pointing out that sentences such as those in (11), (12), and (13) are paraphrases or synonymous or equivalent do not help us explain to our students when they should use one form rather than another.

11. a. I gave the book to John. (Liles, (1971) among others)
    b. I gave John the book.

12. a. George turned off the light.
    b. George turned the light off. (Fraser, (1965) among others)

13. a. John is taller than Mary.
    b. Mary is shorter than John. (Bartsch and Vennemann, (1972) among others)

Only two linguists that I know of have, on philosophical grounds, questioned this approach to grammar. Erades, a traditional grammarian, argues as follows:

> It may be safely said that in language a difference of form always corresponds to a difference in meaning and whenever more than one construction is--theoretically--possible, they never wholly and under all circumstances denote the same thing. The first axiom of all valid linguistic thinking is that in language nothing can serve as a substitute for something else.
>
> (Erades, 1943)

Bolinger, a contemporary linguist, recently criticized the transformational-generative approach as a serious misdirection of effort. He stated that if transformationalists had gone at the business of paraphrase by trying to pinpoint what it is that makes two things different, instead of talking about things being perfectly the same, then he could have gone along with the approach. (Bolinger, 1975). Thus apart from statements such as those made by Erades and Bolinger there is minimal practical support the ESL teacher can derive from the theoretical linguists.

One final problem, in addition to the problems of context and paraphrase discussed above, is the question of hypothesis versus fact when it comes to English usage. Some ESL texts, reference grammars, and studies by linguists do, in fact, give us interesting information about language in context. However, almost all of such information that is available is hypothetical and intuitive in nature rather than empirically verified fact. When such analyses or hypotheses are later empirically tested, they may prove inadequate. For example, the account of phrasal (or 'two-word') verbs by Bolinger (1971), which hypothesizes that separable two-word verbs tend to split when the information contained in the object noun phrase is old information (see 12b) but not to split when the object contains new information (see 12a),[5] has been disproven by the results of Ulm's experimentation (1974), which demonstrates that irrespective of context[6] certain separable two-word verbs tend to split; others do not and that there is a general tendency among English speakers not to split.

The point I am trying to make is that rules of English usage should not be based on intuitive, theoretical hypotheses but on fact (i.e. empirical data derived from valid tests, relevant samples of uncontrived written and spoken discourse, etc.) Ideally, only those usage rules that have been empirically tested and proven statistically significant should be presented to ESL classes as truly valid explanations of the linguistic behavior of native speakers of Standard English. However, since very little data of this kind are available, the ESL teacher must be taught how to cope with this lack of information during the interim and, if so inclined, taught how to gather the relevant data and carry out the necessary research as a part of his/her job.

Relevant UCLA Studies.

For the past several years students in the UCLA TESL program have made a contribution towards closing the above information gap by carrying out ESL-centered and context-centered studies of English structure. These studies have come about primarily as a result of research done for an M.A. thesis in TESL or for English 215, an MA-level course in the Structure of English. While not every single one of our studies is reported here, the list is representative and comprehensive. A few of the projects are interrelated and certainly more research building on the work reported below is needed.

Greeley (1973) synthesizes the work that Bull (1968), Joos (1968), Twaddell (1960), and other linguists have done on the tense and aspect of the English verb and provides a readable, non-technical account that includes much useful information for the ESL teacher. Moy (1974) in a narrower study of the same area describes the use of the English present perfect in context and provides suggestions for teaching this troublesome verb form.

So's 1973 study of infinitives and gerunds makes good use of an earlier intuitive analysis of these constructions by Bolinger (1968), which is in part empirically verified by So's findings. So not only presents a summary of most previous analyses of infinitives and gerunds, he also provides extensive and fairly exhaustive lists of verbs occurring in the various patterns. E.G.

14. a. V_1-to-V_2: want, like, try, etc.

    b. V_1-NP-to-V_2[7]: (i) want, expect, need, etc.
    (ii) tell, order, persuade, etc.

    c. V_1-V_2ing: stop, enjoy, deny, etc.

    d. V_1-NP-from-V_2ing: stop, prevent, dissuade, etc.

ETC.

Rosensweig (1973) takes the analysis and verb lists prepared by So and develops a pedagogical sequence and a series of exercises for teaching infinitives and gerunds to advanced ESL students.

Ulm (1974, forthcoming) has built on the work of Bolinger (1971), Lebach (1973), and--in particular--Emonds (1973). Her M.A. thesis provides a comprehensive discussion of 'verb-plus-preposition' and 'verb-plus-particle' constructions as well as extensive lists for each of the various verb constructions involved. Pedagogical suggestions directed towards the ESL teacher are also included.

Two other forthcoming studies that also use previous linguistic scholarship as a starting point are being completed by Hannah and Brown. Hannah, who is doing original field work and analysis as well as synthesizing the available literature on modal auxiliaries, has selected the work of Hofmann (1966), which clearly distinguishes between the root (15) and epistemic (16) uses of modals, as her starting point.

15. You may go now. (may=permission granted)
16. It may rain tomorrow. (may=degree of probability)

Brown has started with Celce-Murcia's 1972 study of English comparatives and is carrying out experiments to discover when and why English speakers use the marked (17) rather than the more frequent and usual unmarked (18) form of a comparative.

17. Mary is {shorter / less tall} than John.

18. John is taller than Mary.

Two studies completed as English 215 projects that are worth mentioning are Epting (1973) and Khampang (1973). Epting studied the use in context of the imperative (19) versus the peremptory future (20). Some transformational grammars of English (see Liles, 1971) have suggested that these structures have the same underlying form and are thus transformationally related.

19. Leave the room immediately.

20. You {will / shall} leave the room immediately.

Epting found that sentences such as those in (20) were appropriate only when the speaker was in a position of definable authority and maintained personal distance with respect to the hearer(s). In all other situations the normal imperative--i.e. (19)--is used.

Khampang studied the two so-called genitive or possessive constructions in English (i.e. Shakespeare's plays v.s. the plays of Shakespeare) and found that they are not as mutually exclusive as many ESL texts would suggest. Many textbooks, for example, give a rule-of-thumb such as the following:

21. Use the apostrophe 's' construction if the possessor/head noun is human or animate; use the 'of the' construction if the head noun is inanimate, E.G.

    a. John's car.
    b. the top of the table
    c. *the car of John
    d. *the table's top

Khampang found that numerous factors including (a) degree of formality (22), (b) avoidance of repetitive 'of the' forms (23), and (c) avoidance of a long double apostrophe 's' construction (24) influence the native speaker's choice of a genitive construction in English, a choice which is often made on stylistic grounds.

22. a. Shakespeare's sonnets . . . . . (informal)
    b. the sonnets of Shakespeare . . . . (formal)

23. a. many of the pages of the book were torn
    b. many of the book's pages were torn
    c. all the book's pages were torn
    d. all the pages of the book were torn

    (where (b) was judged better than (a) while (d) was judged better than (c) by native speakers)

24. a. Jack's brother's daughter
    b. the daughter of Jack's brother
    c. Mr. Wilkinson's brother's daughter
    d. the daughter of Mr. Wilkinson's brother

    (where (a) was judged better than (b) while (d) was judged better than (c) by native speakers)

Suggestions for Further Research.

Khampang's work is an example of a pilot study well worth pursuing. Many other studies have either initiated pilot work in one of the following areas or could contribute valuable background information for anyone interested in one of them. Sugamoto (1974, forthcoming) provides background on countability in English nouns and explores in detail the semantic differences existing between Japanese and English in the area of noun countability. A UCLA student interested in carrying out work on article usage should begin with her studies. More work must be done on English prepositions--how to classify and how to teach them better. The M.A. theses of Semano (1972), Chiba (1974), and Khampang (1974) provide good

background in this area. Likewise, more definitive work in the use of active versus passive voice is needed, and Uwimana (1974) provides a good start for anyone interested in this topic. Distinctions among the four ways of expressing futurity in English were not adequately developed in Greeley's 1973 account of the tense and aspect of the English verb. If you happen to be interested in this problem, you could start with Greeley's brief discussion of the topic and her references and go on from there. Conditional constructions constitute another major area of concern for the ESL teacher. Neither Greeley (1973) nor Hannah (forthcoming) treat conditionals in their studies, which deal more specifically with tense-aspect and modal auxiliaries respectively; thus an ESL-centered study of conditionals should be undertaken taking into account the work of Schachter (1971) and others. Another topic mentioned earlier was the resolution of the usage of 'much/many' versus 'a lot of/lots of'. Both Tanka (1974) and Mardirussian (1975) have done helpful preliminary work in this area. Another very useful and important study would be to determine exactly what structure most ESL teachers are expected to teach and then to identify good reference sources or prepare materials that would instruct them in these essentials. The area of direct versus indirect or reported speech also causes recurring problems for ESL teachers and deserves a comprehensive, up-to-date study. The same is true of embedded statements and questions and the teaching problems they entail. This list could be extended virtually indefinitely.

Guidelines.

Before concluding this paper, I would like to consider another frequently asked question that is closely related to the selection of an ESL-centered, context-sensitive study of some aspect of English structure--i.e. Given that I want to study problem X from this perspective, how do I go about it? While I do not have a rigorous and infallible 'discovery procedure' to propose, I have accumulated some suggestions which may prove helpful.

As a preliminary, it helps to have a basic knowledge of research design and statistics since you are trying to uncover facts about English usage, i.e. rules that are statistically significant.[8] (You should not be content merely to reiterate or formulate interesting hypotheses.)

Turning to treatment of the specific research question selected, you should begin with a review of the literature. For example, what did the traditional grammarians like Jespersen and Poutsma have to say about this? Have the transformationalists done any work in this area? Does Fowler's Guide to Usage have anything to say? How is the problem explained and presented (if at all) in the ESL texts you can get hold of? Has the subject been discussed in the ESL/EFL journals?[9] What relevant typological studies have been done in the area under investigation? --i.e. what happens in other languages?[10] This is just a sample of the specific options entailed in doing a 'review of the literature.'

Another aspect of the investigation should be in the area of discourse. Examine the natural written and spoken discourse of native speakers for samples of the constructions you are investigating. Consider the context (linguistic, social, etc.) and try to determine why one form or construction was used rather than the other. Typically, by surveying the literature and examining discourse you are able to develop a set of hunches (or tentative hypotheses) regarding your topic.

The next step involves testing out the hypothesis or hypotheses, and this is often where the greatest ingenuity is required. For some background and ideas see Kempson and Quirk (1971), Quirk and Svartvik (1966), and Greenbaum and Quirk (1970) as well as the UCLA theses that have involved extensive testing and/or data collection.[11] Given the nature of your topic, you should try to develop test situations that will affirm or deny each hypothesis. For example, Sher's hypothesis (1975)--contrary to that of Lakoff and Peters (1969)--was that the two versions of a symmetric predicate (see 25 A and B below) were not equivalent and that the noun phrase object following either the main verb or the preposition coming after the predicate adjective would correspond to the larger, the more important, the more immediate actant in the context. To test this out she used items such as the following:

25. Suppose it was discovered that Shakespeare did not write his plays alone. Someone named Smith helped him, although the real genius did come from Shakespeare. How would you describe the relationship?

    A. Shakespeare wrote with Smith.
    B. Smith wrote with Shakespeare.
    C. no preference
    Comments (optional) _____

According to Sher's hypothesis, the answer to (25) should be (B). A statistically significant number of respondents chose (B), a few chose (A), and even fewer chose (C). The optional comments often proved interesting and insightful whether or not the respondent had given the predicted answer. Any test would have to contain several items testing out the same hypothesis. It will probably be a better test if there are also an equal or greater number of distractor items testing out something else so that it is more difficult for the subjects to catch on to the experimenter's hypothesis. The test probably should begin with one or two sample items that show the subjects exactly how they are expected to proceed. The test should be piloted, revised, and then administered to a large, varied population of Standard English speakers before elaborate statistical operations are carried out and conclusions are drawn.

Last, but emphatically not least, if the results of the testing are significant, the pedagogical implications for the teaching of English as a Second Language should be clearly spelled out by providing a teaching strategy, a sequence of teaching points, and/or sample lesson materials. It might also be worthwhile to review existing materials and judge their adequacy or inadequacy in light of the findings.

Many other major and minor procedural suggestions could be made, but the above at least provide a general framework for the novice based on my own experience as well as that of my present and former students.

Conclusion.

It is my opinion that improvement of the linguistic aspect of ESL teaching materials and strategies (as well as improved training of ESL teachers) will come about only if the type of ESL-centered, context-centered research suggested in this paper is carried out on a large scale. There are at least five steps involved in the achievement of this goal. First of all, as part of their overall training in the structure of English, TESL students should be made aware of the

Erades-Bolinger principle that a difference in form usually signals a significant distinction in meaning and use. Secondly, they should be given a general overview of the research that has been done by theoretical linguists. For a comprehensive source, see Stockwell, et al. (1973), which is the most useful individual source; for other interesting contributions by one author, see the items listed under 'Bolinger' in the References. Thirdly, TESL students should be familiar with the studies of English in context that have already been carried out, e.g. many of the M.A. studies mentioned in this paper along with other sources such as Quirk and Svartvik (1966), Greenbaum and Quirk (1970), and Kempson and Quirk (1971). Fourthly, students should be assisted (i.e. given numerous viable options) in the selection of a topic worthy of intensive study. Finally, given students with interest, intelligence, and a good topic, they must be specifically trained and guided to carry out ESL-centered, empirical linguistic research. I emphasize this sequence because history should convince us that we can neither wait for nor depend upon the theoretical linguist to do this work for us.

FOOTNOTES

1. Those prospective ESL teachers who find the rules of English structure difficult must nonetheless be thoroughly instructed in the basics of English structure: tense usage, article usage, types of question formation, types of complementation, modal auxiliary usage, direct and indirect speech, formation of conditionals, types of comparison, use of prepositions, etc.
2. Here I am thinking of the majority of ESL texts in which the author(s) introduce predominantly manipulative type drills in a series of unrelated sentences, i.e. uncontextualized. For example, (a) fill in the blank(s) in the following sentences, (b) change the following sentences from form X to form Y, (c) add not to each of the following sentences, etc.
3. This example was pointed out to me by Judith Tanka in an oral presentation and term paper--both prepared for English 250K, Winter, 1974.
4. Some exceptions to this generalization can be found in Celce (1970), and Quirk and Greenbaum (1973).
5. The general principle suggested as an explanation of this hypothesis by Bolinger (1971) and--in another study--by Lebach (1973) is that splitting is a function of new information last, i.e. the tendency is to put new information last and when you do, you don't split.
6. In other words, lexical idiosyncrasy--perhaps historically motivated--seems to be a better explanation of what is happening than some general and powerful psychological or semantic principle.
7. The difference in the two patterns in (14b) is that the verb in the first group would have the NP appear only once as subject of a that-clause paraphrase --where a that-clause is grammatically possible--whereas the verbs in the second group would have two occurrences of the NP in a that-clause paraphrase (i.e. object of the matrix sentence as well as subject of the that-clause) e.g.

I {want / expect / need} you to do that---I {*want / expect / *need} that you should do that.

I {told / ordered / persuaded} him to do that---I {told / ordered / persuaded} him that he should do that.

8. I myself do not have such background and find that I must pester and rely on friends and colleagues who do. I plan to fill this gap in my own training as soon as possible.
9. Here I am thinking specifically of journals such as The TESOL Quarterly, English Language Teaching, and Language Learning.
10. I have already discussed the importance of this elsewhere in another connection--Celce-Murcia (1972)--and would like to refer the reader to studies such as Greenberg (1966) and the Stanford studies on Language Universals for more specific information.
11. A good example of data collection and error analysis is Semano (1972). A good example of data collection and linguistic analysis is Hannah (forthcoming). Some of the M.A. studies that entail extensive testing procedures are Chiba (1974), Khampang (1974), Sher (1975), and So (1973).

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